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ABSTRACT

The designer of a modern community college must concomitantly meet the needs of those who expect a college to fit their traditional perceptions of a suitable physical plan, and not repel the great numbers of nontraditional students the community college is expected to serve. Many community colleges have been built as an uneasy compromise between these two requirements. The selection of the site for West Los Angeles College took place between 1958 and 1967. Site development began in 1966 and is still going on. Only one plan was considered for site development, and underlying this plan were the following assumptions: a campus should look more like a campus than like the buildings in its vicinity; the campus will collect people from a commuting range of five miles or so, and everyone will drive to campus; stand-up live teaching of liberal arts courses will be the dominant pedagogical form. Planning a practical setting for a modern community college should be influenced by a philosophic commitment to offer direct community services, and programs to suit the needs of everyone in the community. Involvement of an urban design group as advisors to the Board prior to determination of college type, locale, emphasis, and site seems a minimal first step to meeting this philosophical commitment. (NHM)

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THE URBAN DESIGN IMPLICATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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The community college is a product of twentieth century America. The idea of a readily accessible, publicly supported institution that offers college parallel, occupational, and adult basic education along with a broad range of educational services to its community was set forth in the 1920's. More recently the drive for more years of formal schooling has propelled the community college into becoming a major force in American higher education. Currently there are 1200 such institutions offering two-year associate degrees along with trades certification programs and self-help courses to more than 3 million students.

Two modifications in community college philosophy have arisen in the past 25 years. First, the proponents of the community college have urged that the college become more closely identified with its sponsoring district through direct community services. In California, where 100 two-year colleges enroll more than 800,000 students, each community college district may levy a community services tax to raise funds that are to be used for community recreation. Second, open admissions and deliberate attempts to enroll ever-increasing numbers of students has become prevalent. By law, California community colleges are authorized to provide educational programs for any person who has attained age 18 and/or has a high school diploma. The idea that the community college should offer something for everyone--from the first college experiences for beginning students to job retraining for middle-aged and recreational and self-help courses for the elderly--is the norm.

Many design implications are presented in planning the setting for colleges of this type. Most early American colleges were rural. Although their organizers could have found precedent for urban locale in the great medieval universities of Europe, they chose to build in the countryside as far as possible from the cities. To this day many college catalogs carry notations relating the institution's potential

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benefits to its pastoral qualities. In addition, a style of architecture distinctly identified as "College Gothic" developed as a form in which to house the isolated institution. Thick walls, vaults, high ceilings, and massive facades give colleges built in that style the appearance of medieval churches or fortresses. The image projected is one of age, stability, isolation--a sacred enclave where people go to be initiated into the mysteries of the higher learning.

Because the community college was a late arrival on the higher education scene, its planners felt a special urgency to have it accepted as a legitimate institution. Accordingly, in addition to their adopting teaching techniques, graduation ceremonies, student activities, and numerous other accouterments of four-year colleges and universities, they attempted to duplicate the campus forms. However by so doing they betrayed a portion of their philosophy. A college that purports to offer programs for nearly everyone in the community must be readily accessible. The early community colleges built outside the cities presented difficulties to people who could not afford automobiles, the elderly, the physically handicapped, and indeed those who may have been led to feel subtly unwelcome because the institution was housed in such an unfamiliar setting.

The urban designer faced with the problem of planning a community college is faced with a dilemma. Many people expect a college to look like a college--down to the ivy on the walls--and feel they are being offered something less than worthy if they are asked to attend classes in a church basement or a high school after hours. The necessity of constructing a campus that the people can point to with pride saying, "That's <u>our</u> community college," must be considered. However at the same time the designer must be careful to plan a setting for educational activities that does not repel the great numbers of untraditional students it is supposed to serve. If the college is to be housed on a single campus it must be readily accessible and inviting. If it is to be spread in numerous locations

throughout the district, it must resemble a college so that it does not violate traditional perceptions. Many community colleges appear to have been built as an uneasy compromise between the two.

West Los Angeles College: The Site

The development of West Los Angeles College in the 1960's offers an example of the design process as applied to a new community college. The first community college in Los Angeles was organized by the Unified School District in 1929. In 1931 the Los Angeles Junior College District was formed with a territory comprising most of the city of Los Angeles, plus Burbank, Beverly Hills, Culver City, Carson, Alhambra, and all or part of thirty additional cities in Los Angeles County. Several colleges were built within the district in the immediate post-war period: East 1945; Pierce 1947; Harbor and Valley in 1949. These colleges followed the population trends within the district because, as a commuter institution, the community colleges draw most of their students from their immediate vicinity. A college was not built on the west side because, although population there was high, Santa Monica had had a community college since 1929 and Los Angeles students were permitted to go there on interdistrict agreement. That is, students from Culver City, Beverly Hills, Westwood, Brentwood--the area west of La Cienega Blvd.--would typically apply for and receive permission to attend Santa Monica College while those east of La Cienega would go to Los Angeles City College on Vermont Avenue.

In 1958 the then school board began discussing a site for a college in the western part of the district and in December 1959 authorized an acquisition study. The Board had a very active real estate group watching carefully for all possible school sites in the district. One hundred acres is considered a reasonable size for a community college campus and although there was no

plethora of sites of this size in the western portion of the city, twelve were considered in addition to the one that was eventually accepted. Tabulations for each of the sites were made on the gross area in acres, the net usable land, the total land cost, salvage value of improvements on the land, net land cost, land cost per net acre, grading costs, street and utility cost, extra development cost, total cost of developed site, return from sale of excess property, net cost of site, and net cost per net acre. Several sites were rejected early on in the planning process because of excessive cost of the land. One was disqualified because of geological characteristics. And one was rejected because the councilman from that district notified the Board of his opposition. In August, 1961, the real estate branch recommended a site near Overland Avenue and Stocker Street in Culver City. In December of that year acoustical consultants were appointed to furnish a Noise Survey Report and a mapping service was engaged to prepare an application for a zone variance because the property was located in RI and AI zones.

The Culver City Council appointed committees to determine the adequacy of sewers in the area and the anticipated changes in traffic patterns. The Council saw the advantages of a college as increasing property values, bringing payrolls into the area, saving Culver City students the expense of commuting to Santa Monica, and affording cultural activities to the community. Potential disadvantages were that in time other taxpaying units might be built on the property and that traffic, police and fire protection, street lighting costs would be increased. The Culver City Planning Commission objected initially because of the zoning but withdrew. Accordingly, in April 1962 the Culver City Council notified the Board that it was in favor of locating the college in that area.

Several other lay groups had their say on the college. Metro Goldwyn

Mayer studios had a large parcel adjoining the site and stated its opposition. Hughes Aircraft was concerned that the property not be built to a height affecting the approaches to their airport. But the regional commission of Los Angeles County approved the acquisition and use of the property and the Culver City Democratic Club went on record favoring the site. By the time MGM withdrew its opposition in 1962 there was no more contest.

The Board set out to find the money to build the college but the 1960's were difficult times for capitalizing schools. Los Angeles Junior College bond elections lost in 1962, 1963, and 1966 and tax increase measures failed on the ballot in 1966 and 1969. The Board was preparing to build the college on a staged basis using funds saved from operating costs when the Watts riots occurred causing a shift in plans. Had the 1966 tax override measure passed the Board would have proceeded with three new colleges simultaneously--one in the Southcentral area and one in the Northwest portion of the Valley in addition to West Los Angeles College. However, the realization that funds were only available for one new college caused a reassessment. Which one should be built first?

Various citizen groups argued for a college in the Southcentral area, others insisted that West Los Angeles be built first. The proponents of the Southcentral site said the people of Watts needed a college because the more affluent students in the western part of the city had access to higher education institutions to which the lower socio-economic groups in the Southcentral area were effectually denied admission. The Board acquiesced and Los Angeles Southwest College was opened in 1967.

The Culver City site proponents did not give up. The publisher of the Culver City Star News formed a citizens' group including the Culver City Superintendent of Schools, the Manager of the Chamber of Commerce, and several

other interested parties to bring pressure to bear on the Board for building a college in Culver City. Other citizen groups such as a Citizen's Committee for Better Education also attempted to head off the top priority that had been given to Southwest. The Culver City Unified School District went on record as favoring the college.

The general criteria for community colleges includes a need, typified by community action in the affirmative; enabling legislation, which existed; individuals to initiate action; a strong citizenry supporting the college; adequate finances; space; and a qualified teaching staff--not a problem because of the great supply of certificated instructors in the Los Angeles region. All these criteria were met and the college was opened in the spring of 1969 in temporary buildings on the Culver City site. Building contracts were not let until more than six years after the start of the college and even these were only for the first three permanent buildings. Nevertheless the pressure for a college in the western part of the district had been so strong that the Board could no longer deny the institution.

Some of the opposition to the formation of West Los Angeles did not go on record. The Santa Monica Unified School District stood to lose a sizeable proportion of its students, hence it was interested. But a Santa Monica College Committee reported that although many students would be lost, the district would not suffer unduly since no vocational programs requiring special facilities or equipment were planned for the West Los Angeles College. Nevertheless there was much concern that Santa Monica College would be reduced considerably. There was also some opposition from Los Angeles District staff people who felt that a college in the western section of the city would affect the racial composition of Los Angeles City College. The fear was that City

would become a predominantly Black school as white students from the western section went to the new college. In order to avert this potentiality several specialized programs were created at City College so that students from all over the district would be drawn in to help maintain the racial balance. Most of the Medical Technology programs offered in the Los Angeles District and many specialized foreign language programs even now operate at City College. As it turned out, however, West Los Angeles College did not become a white enclave because of the changing residential patterns. Currently it has approximately 42% whiteand 42% Black students, with the remainder being made up of other ethnic minorities.

In sum, the selection of the site for the college took place between 1958 and 1967. The principal actors were the school board, district office personnel, and several citizens' groups. Key issues in locating the site were approval of neighboring governmental bodies, land owners, and other interested groups. Cost of site development was also an important consideration.

West Los Angeles College: The Design

The design aspects of the campus itself represent a separate set of problems. Here the principal actors are the architects selected by the Board, district level personnel, and faculty and administrators from the College itself. The time of developing the campus began in 1964 and is still going on. The key issues are the type of campus buildings to be erected. The main considerations are costs and the nature of the educational programs offered at the college, all as modified by the perceptions of what a campus should look like.

The specificiations for the campus were prepared in 1964 by the Educational Housing Branch of the Los Angeles School District. A Master Planning Committee

of district-level personnel was set up to develop these specifications in accordance with state formulas for square footage per student, faculty, and type of teaching to be conducted. Other considerations included the fact that because the site was only 88 acres, slightly less than the district prefers, the buildings would have to be grouped more closely. In addition a major sewer outflow line cuts exactly through the middle of the property, making it impossible to build on top of this portion of the site. This fairly reduces the usable area. The site has a steep slope backed up against a range of hills. Masonry or concrete structures were ruled out because of earthquake faults in the area. Also although the Los Angeles Board prefers to spread its colleges out in one- and two-story row buildings--such as at Valley and Pierce--at West it was forced to a multi-story configuration because, after removing parking areas from the usable space, only some 20 acres remain.

The Superintendent's staff called together a 39-person building committee comprised of faculty and administrators from around the district. The Science building was to be designed in accordance to the wishes of the Science Faculty, the Library in accordance with the predilections of the Library staff, and so on. Members of the architectural firm met with these committees so that their wishes could be translated into building design. Actually the architects, Powell, Morgridge, Richards, and Coghlan, have designed numerous community colleges around the country, hence were quite familiar with the probable outcomes. They knew how much money was available and more importantly, what the expectations of faculty and staff would be.

The first buildings, underway now, include the four-story main theme building, designed so that it can be seen from a great distance, a two-story classroom building, and a two-story Science Building. The Science faculty

opted for a traditional building with laboratories including rows of tables and sinks. The main classroom building is comprised of large open spaces with movable partitions and 70 square-foot faculty offices arrayed along one wall. The four-story theme building is considered to be the Learning Resources Center combining book stacks, television production facilities, learning carrels, and media distribution facilities. The Library staff wanted a more traditional-appearing library, but was overruled by administrators who insisted that Learning Resources Centers were the wave of the future, if not the present. The campus that is now being built will appear quite familiar to people who have seen community colleges in other parts of the state and the nation.

Several assumptions underlie development of the buildings. First, the campus will look more like a community college than it does like the buildings in its vicinity, whereas an integration with existing or planned urban development could have effected a real contribution to Culver City. Another assumption is that everyone will be driving to the campus--parking lots are included on two sides of the campus center with the third site reserved for playing fields and the back of the campus against the hills. A campus for commuters also assumes the separateness of faculty and students with the 70-square-foot faculty offices allowing room for no more than one desk, some shelving, and perhaps a chair for a visitor. Instead of arranging common meeting rooms, it is as though they deliberately set out to isolate one group from the other. Within the buildings appears also an expression of the assumption that stand-up-live teaching will be the dominant pedagogical form. Liberal arts are emphasized on the rationale that Santa Monica College and Los Angeles Trade-Technical College will serve people desiring these courses.

The campus will have little impact on its surrounding area except in the case of traffic occasioned by students driving in. Bus service has been

initiated between Culver City and the campus but the buses enter and return nearly empty. A sizeable number of bicycle racks was installed coincident with the energy crisis of 1973-74 but these too remain little used even though most of the students reside within biking distance.

It seems useful to remark that no alternative plans for developing the site were considered. The principal actors seemed accepting of the assumptions--if indeed they were aware of them--and designed the campus accordingly. The basic assumption that there shall be a campus collecting people from a commuting range of 5 miles or so is the dominant theme. Schooling in America proceeds from this. The primary schools are typically within walking distance of the children. The middle schools are somewhat larger, somewhat further away. The secondary schools are even larger and people usually must be transported to them. The colleges are larger still with people travelling even further distances to reach them.

The Los Angeles District has since launched yet another college in the Northeastern San Fernando Valley, making a total of 9. The campus is still the dominant form. However, the widespread development of community outreach programs--courses that are offered in numerous locations throughout the district--may yet overtake the campus builders; the District has extensive plans for this type of service. Further, the concept of the community college as a community renewal agency has been perceived in some cities. Here the college opens in an abandoned department store or office building in a downtown area and serves to revitalize the area. However, where this has happened such as in Dallas, Texas, and Richmond, Virginia, as soon as the district passes a bond issue allowing for the construction of new buildings, the college follows the flight to the suburbs and builds new campuses outside

the city. The use of reproducible media presents still another potential modification in campus form. Educational agencies such as the British Open University operate by beaming reproducible educational programs over television, through the mails, and through other media. Student and teacher interaction takes place in small learning clusters in rented facilities. This form too may change the assumptions on which American campuses are built. But for now, the isolated enclave remains the dominant form.

Involvement of an urban design group as advisors to the Board prior to determination of college type, locale, emphasis, and site seems a minimal first step if the pattern is to be broken. Failing this, the criteria for college construction may change in time but it is not likely that education as a considered part of urban development will be any closer.

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